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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN AND DRL/IL

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SUBJECT: ANTI-GOG PROTESTS END PEACEFULLY, EARLY

1. (U) Summary: Nationwide protests organized by labor and popular groups scheduled for June 8-9 were suspended late on June 8 after protest leaders reached agreement with President Berger on a range of measures to address demands. The demonstrations were smaller than expected and remained peaceful throughout the day, with no violence reported. The GOG handled this first major anti-government protest effectively, preventing violence and defusing the situation by engaging in dialogue. Concessions offered by the GOG demonstrated flexibility but did not damage GOG fiscal, trade or agrarian agendas. End Summary.

2. (U) On June 8, 7-10,000 protesters from a conglomeration of labor, campesino and human rights organizations blocked highways and demonstrated at selected sites in the capitol, including the international airport. The main groups involved included campesino groups CNOC, CONIC and CUC; labor federations UASP, UGT, CNSP, and the national association of teachers; the Social Organizations Collective (COS), comprised of a network of human rights and social interest groups; and the university student organization (AEU). The demonstrations were organized to protest the GOG policy of forcibly evicting squatters from disputed plantation properties (by campesino groups), and to protest tax increases affecting workers in the fiscal reforms under consideration by Congress and reject CAFTA (by labor, student and social groups).

3. (U) In Guatemala City, two to three hundred protesters gathered at the airport, which functioned normally throughout the day, with police maintaining access for passengers and workers. Fifty teachers gathered outside the Ministry of Education; 1,000 protesters gathered at the Supreme Courts; approximately 500 were outside Congress; and roughly 5,000 gathered in the city's central square. Highway access to Antigua, Sacatepequez province, was closed by 300 protesters; several other key highway crossings were blocked in different regions of the country. Protests lasted from around 8:00 am until early evening, and were generally peaceful with no violent incidents reported in the city and few elsewhere. There were several unconfirmed incidents reported outside of capitol. A report that protesters were tear-gassed in Baja Verapaz was denied by observers from the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (PDH). PDH representatives were present at all protest sites to help mediate with authorities and prevent violence.

#### Evictions and Other Demands

4. (U) After a policy of not enforcing eviction orders under the former government, the Berger Administration declared early its intention to evict squatters from land where property rights are clearly established. It has reportedly followed through with this promise in 39 cases since taking office. Twenty-three of these evictions, performed by the National Civilian Police (PNC), have been violent. Campesino advocacy groups and other human rights defenders have claimed that in some cases the PNC burned crops and homes, looted, and have arrived at the plantations drunk, sometimes along with private security forces. (There have been no reports of injuries or deaths associated with the evictions.) The PNC has denied any wrongdoing. The investigative daily "El Periodico" recently published pictures of burnt houses and a child holding teargas canisters allegedly used by police to force squatters off of the land.

5. (U) The other major demands of the protesters included calls to limit the burden of new personal tax increases on lower-income individuals (by continuing exemption of certain types of income and raising the income floor above which individuals are taxed), and a rejection of the Central America-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

#### Organizers Meet with Berger and others

6. (U) Late on June 8, an agreement was reached between the GOG and protesters, who subsequently canceled the second day of protests scheduled for June 9. The agreement came after President Berger, the President of Congress, the President of

the Supreme Court, and the Attorney General met with leaders of the protesting organizations. During this meeting, which lasted close to five hours, participants reportedly agreed on the following:

-- the GOG agreed to consider proposing revisions to the eviction law within 90 days;

-- the GOG agreed to create a new Prosecutor's Office for Agrarian Affairs in the Public Ministry to handle any future evictions of squatters;

-- the GOG agreed to suspend disputed evictions while the land dispute agency CONTIERRA reviews each case;

-- the GOG agreed to exempt the legally mandated "aguinaldo" and "bono 14" salary payments (two extra months salary due every employee, hitherto untaxed) from taxable income and to raise the floor for personal taxation to 3000 Quetzals (\$375)/month (the original proposal was for a floor of 1500 Q/month);

-- the GOG promised to translate the CAFTA agreement into indigenous languages;

-- protesters agreed to refrain from protests for 90 days; and,

-- the participants agreed to meet again on June 15th;

Comment

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17. (SBU) These were the first widespread anti-government protests and came at a sensitive time for the GOG, as Congress considers a fiscal reform proposal crucial to the GOG. Despite relatively low turnout (similar protests under the Portillo government occasionally reached 25-30,000), the high political stakes required the GOG to take preventive action to prevent any violence and political action to defuse protester demands, which it did successfully. The concessions offered by President Berger and other authorities mollified protesters without damaging the GOG's fiscal, trade or rural development priorities. Rather than encouraging more protests, as some might fear, the main result of the protests was to show that impatience with the GOG among social groups has not yet reached critical mass.  
HAMILTON